

King Kong



PLANET THE



OF APE

Peter Jackson's monster odyssey is finally drawing to a close, and *Empire* was with him every step of the way - from the casting through to the creation of the set, the concept art and then King Kong himself...

WORDS IAN NATHAN

JACKSON'S KONG ODYSSEY

It is third time lucky in Peter Jackson's bid to remake the king of monster pictures...

ATTEMPT NO. 1: 1970

The background: A nine-year-old New Zealander sees the 1933 masterpiece and, the very next day, is inspired to make his own version of the film.

The vision: A small-scale re-imagining, with Manhattan painted on a sheet and Kong made from a bendable rubber frame covered in possum fur.

The verdict: "I tried to remake it on this Super 8 camera my parents used for home movies," says Jackson. "My mum had a fur coat made from possums. I asked her if I could cut it up." The film was abandoned as too ambitious...

ATTEMPT NO. 2: 1996

The background: Before embarking upon the Rings trilogy, Jackson was set to remake *Kong*. Universal then got cold feet and dropped it into a metaphorical ravine.

The vision: A period piece set in 1933, the year the original was released, with a fully CG gorilla. Although it was rowdier than the current incarnation. "It was an Indiana Jones type of film," admits Jackson.

The verdict: "We were about six months into pre-production, but we could feel this undertow of uncertainty from the studio," remembers Richard Taylor, head of Weta Workshop then and now. Taylor even sculpted a three-foot metallic maquette of Kong wrestling with a T-Rex as a gift. Jackson sent the finished sculpture to Universal, who were so delighted they put it in their foyer. Four weeks later the film still fell flat. "So Peter, in true Kiwi form, asked for it back," hoots Taylor.

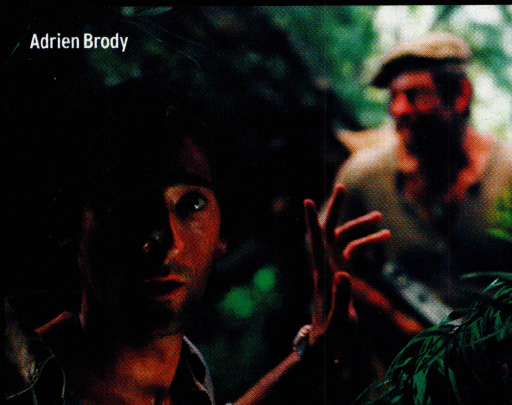
ATTEMPT NO. 3: 2005

The background: Three fantasy films, \$3 billion and 17 Oscars later, Universal came begging, offering the biggest directing deal in history: \$20 million up front against 20 per cent of the gross.

The vision: Remaining a period piece, Jackson altered his first script, dispensing with a flippant tone to recapture the emotional resonance of the original.

The verdict: "This relationship between Ann and Kong is as believable as possible," Jackson asserts. "Why is it he doesn't kill her? What is it that has stayed his hand? How does she react to that? And what does she do when she realises his curiosity and his empathy is starting to be sparked by her?" The answers follow in December...

Adrien Brody



Naomi Watts plays Ann Darrow.



"S-H-I-I-I-I-I...T!"

Andy Serkis knew he was in trouble when the dominant male silverback decided the London-born actor should mate with his two choicest females. Of course, in the social hierarchy of a band (or woop) of gorillas, this was the highest compliment – "Come, skinny ape creature who was ace in *The Lord Of The Rings*. I offer you my healthiest wives to make strong gorilla offspring with silky coats and versatile acting talent." In the monkey house of London Zoo, where Serkis had been given special dispensation to get up close and personal (or to "fossey") with the four resident gorillas, things were getting a little intense.

"The females became unhappy with my lack of compliance," winces Serkis at the memory. "They started to get a bit punchy."

Before the actor was ripped limb from limb, the attendant zoo keepers wrenched him back to the safe side of the cage bars. "It was a bit worrying for a moment," he says ruefully. "I had bruises for weeks. But if you look at it another way, I'm clearly much better looking than David Attenborough."

Not even Daniel "It's my left foot or nothing" Day-Lewis has matched this dedication. Serkis, who is filling the fur of the motion-captured (*née* performed) Kong after his victorious turn as Gollum, was determined that gorilla anthropology would be integral to his take on this most famous of movie "monsters".

"When *Kong* was first made in 1933, people knew virtually nothing about gorilla psychology or behaviour," he explains, his shoulders and forearms heavily bulked up, his body language fluid and graceful. "They had only been discovered in the late 19th century, when people either shot them or stuck them in tiny cages as freak exhibits."

Various monkey experts, led by the redoubtable Dian Fossey, changed all that. The gorilla shifted from heinous beast of the jungle (actually, they prefer mountain sides) to extraordinary primate a chromosome or so away from *Homo sapiens*. The original *King Kong*, for all its thrill, offered a very bleak view of the animals.

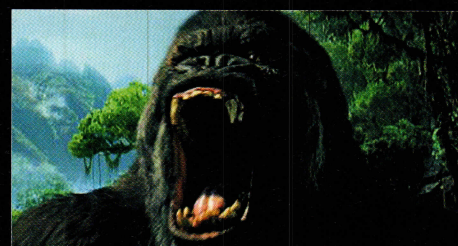
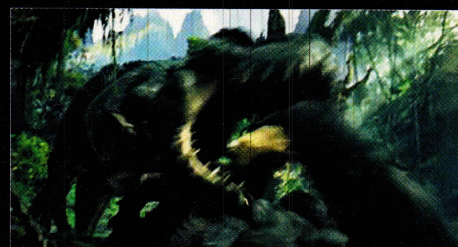
"It was really a case of trying to bring some of that to the character," says Serkis, who could happily host a seminar on ape motivation. "For



Suits you, sir:
Jack Black as Carl
Denham.

SIMIAN SNEAK PREVIEW

Empire enjoyed an exclusive look at an awesome Kong action scene at this year's Comicon, introduced by gorilla guru Peter Jackson himself...



Peter Jackson introduced the footage via a pre-recorded link with a reminder that this was a work-in-progress. No matter – the 150 seconds-long teaser was met with a feverish roar. Like Beatlemania, only with a giant hairy ape instead of Ringo Starr (hang on...).

The scene sees Kong battle three V-Rex's (yes, V), but we join at the point where KK – with Ann in his mitt – has seen

off one, with the battle by now moving to a cliff-top.

Naturally Kong, Ann and the Rex's tumble over the cliff, only for Ann to find herself entangled in a knot of vines... swinging towards the snapping jaws of the last 'Rex.

Jackson is clearly having enormous fun playing with conventions – at one point the vines snap, leaving Ann scrambling to cling on. It's only

as the camera pans up that we realise she's grabbed the tooth of the bemused 'Rex.

Kong gets bitten, and finishes off the last dino by ripping its jaw apart in a nod to the original movie, while his warmer side is showcased when Ann hides behind his legs and Kong's eyes soften.

If this is a work-in-progress, the finished article will be pretty damn special.

instance, in the 1933 version Kong was bipedal, standing up on two feet. Now we all know that gorillas are quadruped and it takes a lot of effort to get up on two feet."

Serkis's research has taken him from Regent's Park to Rwanda, spending time with gorillas in the zoo, in the wild and, no doubt, in the mist as well. He's absorbed everything, from their diet to their mannerisms to their language. Not that Kong will be entirely realistic. It's more a case of combining such truthfulness with the necessary creative flourishes. "If you do it totally real," he accepts, "it might not have the dramatic impact. Although I'm very keen for Kong to remain a vegetarian. He doesn't eat people; he just kills them."

Such debates are at the crux of the new *King Kong*, vying, at the very least, to take its place alongside the original in people's hearts. Director Peter Jackson is equally determined the beast will have depth, and not simply be a rampaging special effect. Although there will still be plenty of rampaging and crushing and smashing – "Kong is basically the last of his own species," interjects Serkis. "He knows that once he dies, his species is

"It's a perfect blend of adventure, mystery and romance." Peter Jackson

gone. So the drive to find a mate is unbelievably powerful. That comes out in a frustrated aggression. He connects that the bride sacrifices are female and he is male, but he is overcome by this intolerable rage because he can't mate with them..." – not to mention much beating of his chest and talking. Hang on... did Serkis just say that he can speak gorilla?

"Oh yes. In life there are about 17 gorilla vocalisations. If a family were here eating their lunch they'd go – Serkis leans forward onto balled fists, curving his back into an extraordinary concave – "Mmmmmrrrrrr!" to say, 'I'm okay.' If a gorilla is reprimanding another it goes" – he starts to slap his chest with his palms – "Mhhh! O-h-h! O-h-h! O-h-h! I don't know if that's going to register with an audience, but it's what I am talking about in the marriage of what gorillas are and what Kong is."

NOVEMBER 2004, SPRINGTIME

in New Zealand, and against a postcard-perfect Wellington sunset, Peter Jackson is admiring his garden wall. It's a good 30 feet high, made of toughened polystyrene and artfully weathered to look as if it has stood on the flanks of Mt Victoria since the time of Hobbits and Elves (which, round here, is only about five years). This isn't Middle-Earth; this is Skull Island, the world-in-making for *King Kong*. And despite a workload that, if anything, is even more demanding than that of the individual *Rings* movies, the director seems at peace. But then, he is in the midst of a year-long personal epiphany.

"It is absolutely true that *King Kong* inspired me to become a filmmaker," he says, turning to face *Empire* and nodding in recognition. Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack's masterpiece >>

King Kong



Jamie Bell as Jimmy.



Naomi Watts spots the critics.

TWELVE MONKEYS Peter Jackson's epic and the 1933 classic are not the only Kong movies. Oh no...



1. Son Of Kong (1933)
2. Mighty Joe Young (1949)*
*Okay, so we know this isn't really a Kong movie, but we liked the headline and needed 12...
3. Konga (1961)
4. King Kong Vs. Godzilla (1962)
5. King Kong Escapes (1967)
6. King Of Kong Island (1968)
7. King Kong (1976)
8. APE (1976)
9. Queen Kong (1976)
10. King Kong Lives (1986)
11. The Mighty Kong (1998)
12. Mighty Joe Young (1998)*
*See left!



was one of the first films to intuit cinema as a temple of dreams – it showed us things we had never or could never have seen before. Jackson was converted on the spot. Not just because of the fabled creature, brought to life with stop-motion techniques unprecedented in 1933, but its “perfect blend” of escapism. “There’s adventure, mystery, romance,” he expounds. “It has that wonderful mix of emotion and fantasy. It’s all that we are trying to capture with this film.”

He gestures at the wall, its gates shut against what is beyond – in truth, it’s the catering tent venting the heady fumes of large-scale cooking – as the perfect symbol of their quest. It also begs a question of heresy – if the original film is your favourite, why try to improve on it?

“Improving is a very weird term when you are talking about a film made in 1933,” he contends. “That’s a classic film. Ours is the remake. With modern technology there is a reason to do it: You can do a photo-realistic gorilla.”

Realism, that’s the key word. For all the story’s imaginative swirls, Jackson wants the tale of filmmaker Carl Denham, the crew of *The Venture*

“Kong’s vegetarian. He doesn’t eat people; just kills them.” Andy Serkis

– including heroic Jack Driscoll and fresh-faced starlet Ann Darrow – and their voyage to a mysterious island to be told in a very real way: “How people in real life would respond to that situation,” as he puts it.

Currently, Jack Black’s eyes are as wide as golf balls and his mouth twists hungrily at some incredible sight on the horizon. “Wait!” he snaps to Colin Hanks, his eyes never leaving what is in front. “Wait!” he barks again. Whatever it is, it’s getting closer. And closer. You can almost feel its presence, the earthquake shudder of the ground, the wrenching of tree branches, the godforsaken roar of rage and loneliness...

“Okay, guys, let’s go again,” interrupts Jackson, bounding over to the two actors. Huddling down, Black starts doing cheesy scared faces while his director plays Kong. You know this isn’t the first

time. The odd thing is, they are both being deadly serious.

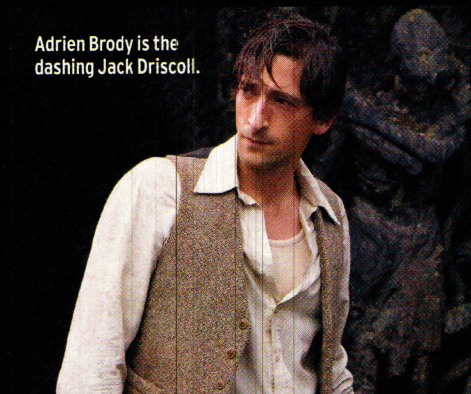
“We have cast it with actors who can play reality,” says Jackson, the scene nailed 10 or so takes later. “Obviously the better the actor, the more you believe in these people.”

AUSTRALIAN ACTRESS Naomi Watts gives Ann a modernity, but with just that right air of the fragile. Adrien Brody, as Driscoll, trades equally in striking looks and acting craft, exemplified by his Oscar for *The Pianist*. However, when he positioned funnyman Black as hubristic filmmaker Denham, the news was greeted with a collective gasp: “You what?”

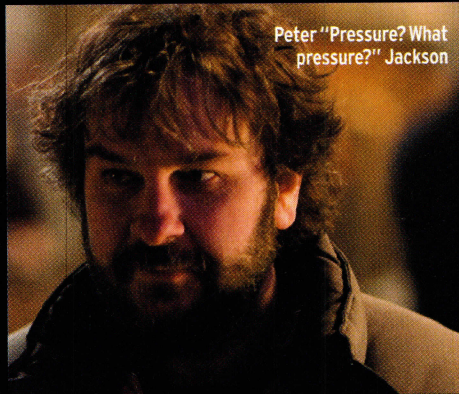
“People do seem surprised at that casting, which I can understand,” accepts Jackson. “Again, we wanted to base it on reality. We did a little bit >>



"Just give me the word, Peter, and I'll slice him in half!" Tensions soar on-set. Possibly.



Adrien Brody is the dashing Jack Driscoll.



Peter "Pressure? What pressure?" Jackson

KING KONG NOW AND THEN

Who plays whom: 1933 vs. 2005...



KING KONG

Stop-motion puppetry and a mechanical arm.



Andy Serkis, and some CGI, of course.



ANN DARROW

Fay Wray, a Canadian scream queen.



Naomi Watts, an Aussie screen queen.



CARL DENHAM

Prolific (126 films!) Robert Armstrong.



Calorific (well, a bit chubby!) Jack Black.



JACK DRISCOLL

War and Western veteran Bruce Cabot.



Son Of Sam veteran Adrien Brody.

of thinking: Okay, it's the '30s, what say we model our Denham on the young Orson Welles? Like Welles, Denham is a genius with an obsessiveness and recklessness that is eventually going to lead to tears. Then we thought of Jack."

One glance in the actor's direction backs up his point. Dressed in a bedraggled linen suit, his hair trimmed unusually short, the comparison is uncanny – a 35-year-old Orson Welles. Aware his director is talking about him, Black pulls an evil grin. "He," Jackson retaliates, "has a personality big enough to take people into danger."

It is too simplistic to compare Jackson with Welles; he is too civilised, philosophical and honest to fit the Wellesian dynamic. A neater comparison is with Black; they share a natural recourse to humour. *Kong* may be a \$130 million enterprise, but Jackson's still a goofball at heart.

As with *Rings*, he has laid himself bare to fan inspection, with monthly online video diaries examined for broadcast by the MPAA – the Motion Primates Association Of America. In one episode, a visibly exhausted Jackson phones Bryan Singer, setting up *Superman Returns* in Sydney,

"There is external pressure on following up *Rings*..." Peter Jackson

asking him to take over on *Kong* while he grabs some kip. Singer duly shows up and asks if Kong can fly. Then Frank Darabont pops by to fill in. All the while, Jackson snoozes away in his comfy chair. On April 1, an announcement is made that two *Kong* sequels are already in the works: *Son Of Kong* and *King Kong: Into The Wolf's Lair*. Such is Hollywood's gullibility, he is taken seriously and has to come clean.

Surely he will be making a trademark cameo in the movie? After all, Cooper and Schoedsack famously manned one of the biplanes that attacked the hapless Kong in 1933. "I don't know, we haven't filmed our biplanes yet," he hints elusively. "We'll have to see."

None of which diminishes the herculean task ahead of him. Jackson is well aware the post-production period will be intense, as he and Serkis

get to grips with gorilla warfare. Beyond this, there is a new kind of pressure. Success, especially the huge success of *Rings*, intensifies expectations and sharpens daggers. Number-one directors are there to be knocked off their perch.

"There's always pressure," he shrugs. "I guess there is an external pressure on following up *Rings*, but it doesn't worry me too much. The real pressure is twofold. Firstly, to be a good remake, that fans of the original will think we did okay. I also just want to make as good a movie as possible..." He ponders the world around him, as if still amazed he's got to this place: his Skull Island. "What I really hope," he concludes, "is that there are lots of nine-year-olds out there who go and see it and become filmmakers in 21 years' time."

>> *King Kong* is out on December 14 and will be reviewed in a future issue of *Empire*.